

First steps towards a great grand Society

The Royal Agricultural Society of NSW is one of Australia's most venerable institutions. This year as we celebrate its 190th anniversary it is timely to reflect on the colonial conditions which gave rise to it.

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When prominent colonial figures Samuel Marsden, Robert Townson and John Blaxland approached Governor Macquarie for permission to form an agricultural society in 1814 they were refused. They would have to wait for a war across the other side of the world to end and for Macquarie's departure seven years later before they would have their way. Considering how central agriculture was to the survival of the colony and its development, it may seem strange that formation was so long delayed, but place, politics and a critical mass in terms of population all had a part to play.

Looking at the hustle and bustle of the city of Sydney today with its suburbs sprawling out to cover the old farming land of the Cumberland Plain, it's hard to imagine the town and outlying areas as they were in 1810 when Lachlan Macquarie arrived. Though certainly no longer a camp, Sydney was nevertheless a crude and ramshackle town; planning had been laissez-faire, public buildings and amenities were in disrepair and the roads were rutted and narrow – in the middle of some, tree stumps still stood. Pigs and goats wandered about freely. Outside Sydney, the only towns were Parramatta and Green Hills (Windsor), and beyond a distance of 40 miles the country was impenetrable.

The colony's total population of 11,700 was thus sparsely scattered and only slowly growing; on average only three convict transports per year were arriving and free settlers were few, especially after the government abandoned a scheme offering free passage.

Determined to make his mark in the backwater he governed, Lachlan Macquarie set to work. An extensive building program commenced, roads were constructed and the regional towns of Liverpool, Pitt Town, Castlereagh, Richmond and Wilberforce were established. The barrier of the Blue Mountains was finally crossed in 1813 and a road was built the following year, opening up potentially vast tracks of land to pastoralism. This development was an important motivating factor behind the first attempt to form an agricultural society.

Entrepreneurial settlers and old hands like Samuel Marsden had been getting out of large scale crop production for some time to concentrate on grazing; intensive agriculture

had proved to be difficult and not very profitable in Australian conditions. Sheep grazing was increasingly favoured – mostly for the local meat market but also more speculatively for the wool trade. Marsden had shipped the first commercial consignment of wool to England in 1811 and was not the only one alert to the fortunes to be made if a reliable export commodity could be found to fill the cargo holds of ships on their return journeys.

With Napoleon's defeat on the bloody battlefield at Waterloo in 1815, peace came to England – along with massive social upheaval. Thousands of British soldiers and sailors returned home to unemployment. A bad harvest compounded the trouble and many people starved. A crime wave ensued and convict transports were sent in escalating numbers to the shores of New South Wales.

By the time Macquarie was packing up to leave the colony in February 1822, the population had trebled to over 30,000, nearly half of whom were convicts. While convict labour flooded in, a new influx of free settlers came too. Many of these were military officers, stood down on half pay and restless for opportunities to improve themselves. Though few had farming experience, they were well educated and highly motivated with money to invest.

Macquarie's replacement, Sir Thomas Brisbane, shared none of the qualms that his predecessor had about an agricultural society; that it would be self-serving and that its chief proponents, as pastoralists, would do more to exploit the land than develop it. With Brisbane in office, firm moves could at last be made towards the establishment of a society.

Initial discussions took place at a gathering on June 21 1822. Three and a half weeks later the new Agricultural Society of New South Wales was fully formed. During that period at another larger and more broadly representative meeting, a committee had been appointed, office bearers elected, and a stock fund established; a prospectus was promptly issued. At a final meeting on July 16, the rules were finetuned and a celebratory dinner followed. As the new patron of the Society and guest of honour, Governor Brisbane addressed the happy assembly, promising practical government assistance. The policy turnaround was complete.

Left: North View of Sydney New South Wales 1822 by J. Lycett. Call no. DG V1/11, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

Below: Portrait of Sir Thomas Brisbane 1848 by Sir John W. Gordon. Call no. DG P2, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW



When Marsden, Townson and Blaxland finally toasted the newly formed Society at that first dinner in July 1822, they were launching an institution which would outlive them many times over.

It's no party without a present...

To mark the 190th birthday of the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS), the RAS Heritage Centre is looking to acquire a copy of the *Australasian Pocket Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1822* for the unique snapshot it provides of the colony at the time of the Society's inception. While it contains the usual stuff of almanacs: a calendar, sunrise and sunset times, the phases of the moon, a tide table, it's the additional, colony-specific information which makes it special.

All the many government fees and duties are listed, including costs involved in land grants; wage rates for labourers are recorded; police regulations are set out. For newcomers the Almanack's thirteen pages of agricultural advice would have been invaluable: local seasons and weather patterns, crops, methods of ground preparation and information about pests and diseases are all discussed.

Interestingly, the Almanack also contains a directory which lists the names of every single person employed in the civil administration and public institutions in both New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, from the governor right down to the lowly clerks in the markets. All military personnel are also named, along with a note as to where they are stationed. That everyone can be named in such relatively few pages is telling. Many of those listed are familiar to us today, not just because they were leaders in their professions, but because they were energetically engaged in multiple aspects of colonial life, including the emergent Agricultural Society.

With information so readily available to us now, and with all our modern conveniences, it's hard to appreciate how useful almanacs once were, especially to those in rural areas. For example, clocks could be set (near enough) by sunrise times; and social events and safe night travel could be planned to coincide with a full moon.

For its fascinating local detail the Almanack will make a wonderful memento of a special year, but as well, with its practical tables and charts it will serve to remind us of a country life long gone, when working the land was more intimately linked to the cycle of days and seasons.

If you have any information on the Australasian Pocket Almanac please contact the RAS Heritage Centre on 02 9704 1111

The committee of the new Society was packed with talent. Their names were a rollcall of the colony's most dynamic personalities and experienced hands. The founding president, Sir John Jamison, a physician, banker, grazier and owner of the model estate Regentville, went on to become one of the Society's longest serving presidents. His vice presidents were Samuel Marsden, William Cox, Robert Townson and Hannibal Macarthur. Townson's name is perhaps less familiar to us today, but he was a well-respected natural history scientist and the colony's leading scholar. His property, Varro Ville, near present day Minto, became renowned for its fine orchards and vineyards and quality stock.

Enlightened individuals, however, could not solve all the problems besetting agriculture in New South Wales by themselves. Much of the land on the Cumberland Plain was exhausted by poor cultivation methods and overstocking, and good bloodstock was in such short supply as to compromise growth in the promising export trade in horses and wool; a new collegiate approach was required. Recognising this, the Society's prospectus called for action to improve breed stock and pasture grasses,

and for husbandry through cooperative effort and the application of scientific methods. The importance of education was stressed along with the need for encouragement. To this end, rules in the prospectus stated that an 'Annual Shew of Stock, and Exhibition of Samples of Wool, Seeds, Implements, or any other Articles tending to the Improvement of Agriculture' was to be held at Parramatta with premiums given as reward for improvements or superiority. From these early beginnings the Society and the Show as we know it were born.

One hundred and ninety years on and the great grand Society is still going strong. The organisation which Lachlan Macquarie feared would be self-serving has instead served the nation. Ironically, given the early social divisions in the colony, the Society's enduring strength has been its ability to bring people and ideas together. When Marsden, Townson and Blaxland finally toasted the newly formed Society at that first dinner in July 1822, they were launching an institution which would outlive them many times over. For two centuries it would play a vital role in the economic development of an increasingly prosperous Australia. And that's certainly something worth celebrating. ■



Above: An artist's impression of the first Show held at Parramatta Park in 1823.